

A Challenging Mix: Information Operations and Public Affairs

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A Challenging Mix: Information Operations and Public Affairs

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"Troops have crossed the line of departure," 1<sup>st</sup>Lt Lyle Gilbert said, indicating to the media the start of the offensive between coalition forces and insurgents within the city of Fallujah.<sup>1</sup> Hours later, CNN reporters discovered the attack had not begun, and the actual attack did not commence for three weeks. The Pentagon later announced that the Lieutenant's remark was part of a psychological operation (psy-op) intent on creating a tactical advantage for the coalition by triggering a response from the insurgents. Troubled by the apparent fabrication, both military members and civilians argue that the release of false information from public affairs to the media is unacceptable, regardless of the intent. The debate over the integration of public affairs with information operations (IO) is not new, but it is strained by the growing influence of media within the battle space. On one hand, some maintain that the role of military public affairs is to provide truthful and reliable information to the public media, and any association with IO will damage its credibility. On the other hand, the lack of contributions of public affairs to the IO campaign hinders the military's ability to access and influence public information. The growing impact of public information on the modern battle space, however, necessitates the integration of public affairs and IO, and only through a coordinated and truthful effort can the US military employ an effective IO plan.

## **The Information Battle Space**

Advances in technology and improvements in weaponry and equipment have made information a vital commodity on the modern battlefield. From digital communications to the guidance of precision weapons, the military force capable of dominating the flow of information across the battle space maintains a distinct advantage over his rival. These same advances in computers and communications that revolutionized the battle space have had a similar effect on global media and how the public receives its information. With the proliferation of satellite communications and embedded reporters, masses of journalists provide copious amounts of information to meet a growing demand for news from the battlefield. No longer reliant on paper or wire to convey a story to the public, today's journalist feeds real-time information around the world to multiple news channels, twenty-four hours a day.

The growing use of the Internet as a news vehicle increases the media's ability to report on the battlefield, and presents additional challenges to the military. As the fastest growing news source in the US, the Internet is, for many, becoming the sole source of information, particularly in developed countries. While the Associated Press, the Wall Street Journal, and other reputable news sources maintain sites on the Internet, anyone with the desire to do so can start and maintain what appears to

be a credible web page. An Internet search of "blog and Iraq" produced 6,510,000 results, including the popular *Fallujah in Pictures* blog site, where the host displays unedited and uncensored photos of combat dead and wounded.

### **Public Opinion and the Military**

Public opinion, shaped largely by the public media, plays a vital role in military operations. Although many in uniform see the media as a battlefield nuisance, the media allows the military to convey a message directly to the public, both domestic and abroad. Lack of public support can have a direct impact on an operation's success or failure, and its importance should not be understated. Dr. Jamie Shae, NATO spokesman during operation Allied Force, asserts that, "winning the media campaign is just as important as winning the military campaign—the two are inseparable. You can't win one without the other."<sup>2</sup> Operation Allied Force typified the first true media war, where adversaries compete for airtime to convey their message (or propaganda, depending on which side you are on) in an effort to sway public opinion. Operation Allied Force also illustrated the "CNN effect" in which individual events, though tactically insignificant, can overshadow an entire campaign and threaten a coalition because of the intense coverage they receive from the media.<sup>3</sup>

As use of the Internet as a primary information source grows, so too will the influence public opinion has on military operations. Increased media coverage, whether on television or on-line, brings the battlefield closer to home. The Internet can do this in a graphic and candid manner, frequently without the burden of credibility. Reflecting on US participation in Somalia, it is evident how quickly public opinion can affect a military campaign. What had begun as a humanitarian mission came to an abrupt end following a raid involving US troops. After the dragging of a US serviceman's body through the streets of Mogadishu appeared on the evening news, public outrage over the incident persuaded President Clinton to quickly withdraw all forces. Former US national security advisor Anthony Lake noted, "American foreign policy is increasingly driven by where CNN points its cameras."<sup>4</sup>

#### **A Core Competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Although an increasingly important aspect of how the military conducts war, IO is frequently misunderstood. In 1998, the Department of Defense published Joint Publication 3-13, *Joint Publication for Information Operations*. The publication defines IO as, "actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems, while defending one's own information and information systems."<sup>5</sup> In late 2003, the Department of Defense released a classified information operations roadmap in

an effort to redefine IO as a core military competency. Although IO activities cover the broad areas of electronic warfare, operational security, computer network operations, military deception, and psychological operations, the latter two receive the most attention. Psy-ops and military deception have become synonymous with IO, and the other, more technical fields sometimes get neglected. Failing to understand the breadth IO, many equate IO with propaganda and deceitful persuasion, and believe an emphasis on IO may threaten the credibility of everyone in uniform. Although IO may include activities intent on deceiving the enemy, the bulk of any IO campaign focuses on conveying an honest, forthright message to audiences both home and abroad.

#### **Public affairs—Loudspeaker for IO**

The integration of public affairs into the IO campaign is problematic at best. Defining public affairs as a related activity to support an IO plan, JP 3-13 states, "Public affairs will not be used as a military deception capability or to provide disinformation to either internal or external audiences."<sup>6</sup> Understanding the need to maintain the credibility of public affairs, doctrine established outright that public affairs not be involved in disclosing false information to any audience. As illustrated in Fallujah, however, operational necessity can create situations that contradict doctrine.

Although coalition forces may have gained a tactical advantage, the military's credibility was certainly damaged.

Changes in global media and how the enemy receives its information further aggravate this issue. The distinction between information released to the public media and to the enemy is disappearing. In an era of satellite communications and the Internet, the ability to keep misinformation from spilling into the public media becomes almost impossible.<sup>7</sup> As in Iraq and Somalia, for example, an adversary that relies heavily on the media for intelligence can be difficult to target without some misleading information finding its way into the US press.

Many in public affairs see any association with IO as a threat to their credibility. Colonel William Darley, a public affairs officer and editor in chief of *Military Review* writes,

"Absorbing military public affairs into IO as a sort of adjunct advertising agency focusing on political messages rather than on factual information would in the long run compound IO shortfalls and facilitate political catastrophe, undermining legitimate IO activities while at the same time destroying public affairs altogether."<sup>8</sup>

The concerns voiced by opponents of the integration of IO and public affairs are legitimate. Tasked with providing accurate and timely information to the public, if public affairs becomes recognized as the government's distributor of propaganda and misinformation, it will lose its credibility. However, public affairs' bases its reservations concerning integration with IO



on the prejudice that IO deals mainly with deceit. Charles Krohn, former deputy chief of public affairs for the Army writes, "If...psy-ops and civil affairs can cast a truthful, persuasive message that resonates with the average Iraqi, why not use the public affairs vehicle to transmit it?"<sup>9</sup>

The military can only accomplish an effective IO campaign through the coordination of public affairs and IO. IO planners and commanders need to understand that the use of public affairs to disclose misinformation to the media threatens the credibility of their primary conduit to public information. Members of the public affairs community need to realize that the ability to influence opinion through the release of public information is too valuable an asset to ignore. Without public affairs as its mouthpiece, IO cells and planners lack the resources to influence the public information realm that dominates the modern battle space. Public affairs officers, integrated into IO cells, should serve as experts on what the military can and cannot do as part of the information war. Without this integration, IO will continue to be underutilized across the battle space, and the credibility of every man and woman in uniform may prove to be the biggest casualty in the nation's War on Terror.

## Notes

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5. Joint Pub 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, 9 October 1998, I-9.
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9. Mazzetti, 2.